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ABSTRACT

Although the influence of patterns of childrearing and parent-child relationships may be long-lived and far-reaching, it is not clear that parents and children have a similar understanding for judgment about parental behavior. An exploratory investigation was conducted to examine the degree and type of dissatisfaction with parental nurturing present in a normal achieving population. Graduate and undergraduate students at a midwestern urban university (N=197) answered questions describing their perceptions of their parents' childrearing behaviors and how they would have liked to have changed their family when they were growing up. Subjects rated their parents on a five-point scale on 16 questions representing the two critical dimensions in parenting patterns of caring--hostility/neglect and autonomy--domination/manipulation. The results revealed that 80% of respondents had some dissatisfaction with their families when they were growing up. Forty-one percent reported feeling that their emotional needs were unfilled. In comparing retrospective parent behavior scores given by subjects to their mothers and fathers, the dissatisfaction was reflected in father scores more than in mother scores. Dissatisfied subjects gave their parents lower scores in nurturing behavior and in encouraging child autonomy than did satisfied subjects. These findings have implications for educators who develop parent-participation programs. (NB)

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Adult Children's Perception of Parent-Child Relations: Implications for Families as Educators

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study of 197 graduate and undergraduate students at a midwest urban university revealed that 80 percent had some dissatisfaction with their families when they were growing up. Forty-one percent felt their emotional needs were unfilled. In comparing retrospective parent behavior scores given by subjects to their mothers and fathers, the dissatisfaction was reflected in father scores more than in mothers. Those subjects who reported dissatisfaction with their families gave their parents lower scores in nurturing behavior and in encouraging child autonomy than subjects who reported satisfaction with their families. These findings have implications for educators who develop parent-participation programs.

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It is not clear that parents and children have a similar understanding or judgment about parental behavior. Gecas and Schwalbe (1986) found that parents' self-reported behavior was unrelated to children's perceptions of their parents' behavior. However, the child's perception of parental values and behavior, rather than the parents' self-reports correlated with the child effect (in this case, the child's self-esteem). Numerous surveys of children and adolescents in the last few decades have related parenting styles—authoritarian, authoritative and permissive—to child outcomes, but they have focused on methods of parental control and punishment technique rather than the child's emotional needs.

When parents act in ways that fulfill their own needs, children's need often go unfilled (See Miller, 1983). Indications are that parental failure to meet children's emotional needs perpetuates itself across generations in a vicious circle (Clausen, 1966; Harris, 1959; Miller, 1983; Pringle, 1980; Rutter & Madge, 1976), sometimes with disastrous consequences. Recent studies have shown, for example, that memories of inadequate nurturing by parents correlate with the incidence of depression in young adults (Bohrnstedt & Fisher, 1986; Burbach & Borduin, 1986; Perris, et al., 1986).

In a poll of 18-24 year olds Gallup reported that 41 percent thought the main fault of parents was neglecting children, failing to understand children or failing to treat the children as persons (Gallup Report, 1984). Another study discovered that while achieving children are likely to have strong relationships with nurturing parents, underachievers are likely to have either domineering, restrictive, or overly-punitive parents (See Conger & Petersen,

1983). Findings such as these indicate that there may be many parents who neither know how to help and care for their children nor how to participate with them in learning activities.

Educators who are interested in involving parents more deeply in the school experience may need an understanding of parenting and parent-child relationships to create effective programs. It may be necessary to include instruction in parenting techniques to ensure the success of parent-school programs. It is unknown that percentage of parents could benefit from parenting instruction, but, preparation for the role of parent is poor compared to other adult roles (Rossi, 1968), and the necessity of universal parenting education has been effectively argued by experts (See, for example, Pringle, 1980) who believe the influence of patterns of child-rearing and parent-child interactions may be long-lived and far-reaching.

The present study is an exploratory investigation of the degree and type of dissatisfaction with parental nurturing present in a normal achieving population. College students were surveyed about their parents' child-rearing behavior. It was expected that memories of unmet childhood needs, if found, would be reflected in adult children's reports of parenting behaviors; that, like the self-esteem, depression and achiever studies, subjects who were dissatisfied in some way with their childhood would rate their parents lower for caring and acceptance behavior and higher for restrictive, punitive, hostile or neglectful behavior.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects of the study were 198 students from a Midwestern urban university. Most were undergraduates; about ten percent identified themselves as graduate students. Subjects ranged in age from 19 to 52 years. Two-thirds were 25 or younger. There were 89 males and 108 females in the sample. The subject population was racially mixed although no count of minority subjects was recorded.

The number of children in subject families ranged from 1 to 15. Only three were single-child families and 54 percent were families with four or more children. Twenty-four percent of the subjects were first born children, and 32 percent were youngest in their families.

Materials and Procedures

Subjects were asked to answer questions describing their perceptions of their parent's child-rearing behaviors and then asked what they would have changed about their family when they were growing up. Since the quality and substance of parent interactions with children depends not only on the sex of the parent but the sex of the child (Minuchin, 1985; Doppleman & Schaefer, 1963), separate scores were collected for each parent. Subjects rated their parents on a five point scale from "Never" to "Always" on 16 questions (See Table 1) representing the two critical dimensions in parenting patterns found in studies with American and European subject—caring <> hostility/neglect; autonomy <> domination/manipulation (Becker, 1964; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979; Arrindell et al., 1986; Arrindell, et al., 1983; Schaefer, 1959).

Analysis

Change Categories

Eighty percent of the subjects answered that they would have wanted some kind of change in their family when they were growing up. Change responses were broken down into categories. Those changes which concerned critical emotional needs (e.g., love and affection, communication, security, acceptance) (Pringle, 1980) were considered basic changes. Because some respondents answered twice, a hierarchy of answers was set up. Respondents who wished for one of the "basic" changes were considered most important. Included in the "basic" group were those respondents who identified one or both of their parents as the focus of the problem.

The non-basic change category contains all respondents who wanted only non-basic changes. Any respondent who wanted a "non-basic" change in conjunction with a change in parent behavior or any other "basic" change would have been included in the latter category. Non-basic change answers involved, for example, siblings, the lack of available material goods, and too much household responsibility for the respondent as a child.

The parent scores of respondents who answered that they wouldn't have changed anything about their family when they were growing up were used as a comparison. Only 11 male respondents and 10 female respondents out of 197 subjects said they wouldn't have changed anything about their families when they were growing up. Parent scores of those who did not answer the question were treated as a separate group. Table 2 lists the categories and populations in this study.

Forty-one percent of all subjects wanted basic changes—either change in a parent's behavior or fulfillment of emotional needs. Forty-seven percent of male respondents and 37 percent of female respondents were included in this group. This is a substantial indication of dissatisfaction.

Parent Behavior Indices

The next step in the analysis was to test whether change category membership corresponded to differences in scores on parent indexes. In each of the four groups of child-rearing behavior questions composite scores were collected for each parent. The hostility total was subtracted from the caring total to produce a caring-hostility (C-H) index. In the same way, an autonomy-domination (A-D) index was created. This seemed justified by the fact that questions within clusters were well correlated (lowest correlation, .3 and the highest .73; the average correlation was .51), and questions from paired clusters were negatively correlated. Graphic representation of the mean index scores broken down by sex and by change categories, are displayed in Figures 1 & 2.

Findings

As expected, the highest index scores were given by subjects who did not want any change in their families. Females, in general gave lower scores to both parents. Subjects generally rated mothers higher than fathers on both indexes. The other extreme low scores were given to fathers by both sexes.

Subjects who wanted basic changes scored their fathers very low on both indices. They scored their mothers higher but not as high as subjects who

wanted non-basic changes. Oneway anovas, testing male and female scores separately, showed significant differences between the no-change, non-basic change and basic change group mean scores for both parents on all indices except A-D index scores given mothers by female respondents. Paired contrasts showed significant differences between the no change and the basic change groups and, also, between the basic change and non-basic change groups (See Table 3).

In general, subjects who felt their emotional needs were unsatisfied gave their parents very low scores on the C-H index. They also scored their parents lower on the A-D index than need-satisfied subjects. This is especially evident in the father scores. The difference between father scores and mother scores for those groups who wanted basic changes is enough to make it plain that for the most part fathers are identified with respondents' dissatisfaction.

Subjects who specifically stated they desired changes in their fathers' behavior scored their mothers much higher than their fathers. For example, the C-H index scores of just those respondents who singled out their father's behavior were -2.4 for males and -.4 for females. The C-H scores for mothers of the same group were 7.5 for males and 8.0 for females.

In contrast, there was little consensus in scoring by males and females who singled out their mothers' behavior for change or who wanted change in the behavior of both parents. One female who was dissatisfied with both parents gave her mother -13 on the C-H index and -11 on the A-D index. She gave her father -2 on the C-H index and -3 on the A-D index. These are some of the most extreme scores in the survey. Because the number of respondents who

wanted to change mother behavior (3 males, 2 females) was low and their scores were extreme, it is difficult to judge the results. The three males who wanted to change their mother scored both parents much lower than the two females in that category. Both males and females, however, scored their fathers high in comparison with their mothers.

A surprising outcome was the group that gave no answer to the change question. Males who did not answer the change question scored parents lower than subjects who wanted no change, but similarly to males who wanted non-basic changes. Females who did not answer the question, however, were quite dissatisfied with both parents, but gave the lowest scores to their fathers—C-H scores (-1.8) and A-D scores (-.8).

Discussion

Miller (1983) posits that attributes such as courage, integrity and the capacity for love are products of parental respect for the child and the child's rights, and parental tolerance for the child's emotions. In Miller's view prosocial behavior is not something that can be taught, but is the natural outgrowth of proper nurturing. Conversely, badly treated children will have an "unconscious need to pass on to others the humiliation one has undergone oneself" (p. 97), and will eventually not only punish others with antisocial behavior, but will also reproduce the damaging parenting practices in rearing their own children. There was some suggestion of this occurring in the Bryant and Crockenberg (1980) study of the behavior of mothers with their daughters. When the mother satisfied the needs of her daughter, not only did the child's prosocial behavior increase and here antisocial behavior decrease,

but so did that of her sibling. In the same study, verbal antisocial behavior between female siblings appeared to be a function of the mother's unresponsiveness and insensitivity in situations of high stress and need.

The critical function of the parent or primary caretaker, therefore, would seem to be sensitivity and responsiveness to children's needs. If Miller's theory is correct, those adults who perceived their parents as nurturing and who had their needs met would be satisfied with themselves and their childhood and be inclined to prosocial behavior. In this study, even those who said they wanted no change gave their parents only a high of 9.8 out of a possible 16 points on the C-H index and a high of 8.5 out of 16 on the A-D index. This may signal a general dissatisfaction with parents, and as Miller's theory suggests, the feelings have lasted beyond childhood, since 40 percent of the respondents were over 25 years of age.

The findings of this study may also indicate that serious dysfunction in parent-child interactions may be common. For those who reported their emotional needs were unfilled in childhood (41 percent), the dissatisfaction was very high. If index scores are any measure of the situation, fathers are being blamed by these respondents for most of the problem. Carol Gilligan (1980) has pointed out that male development is concerned with individualation and competition, while female development is tied to relationships and cooperation. Many fathers may not know how to relate to their children, or may not even understand why they should relate to their children. Change-father answers criticized fathers for lack of attention or interest in their families and children.

Dissatisfied males were more critical of their fathers caring behavior than females. Perhaps males feel they need more attention from and contact with their role models. Of the nine people who blamed both their parents, many cited their father as the problem and criticized their mother for not standing up to their father. Change mother answers which did not involve both parents were complaints about mothers' domineering behavior.

The group that wished for non-basic change also tended to score their fathers lower than their mothers. Females who wanted non-basic changes wanted such things as less babysitting and household responsibility; a sister or another sister (to help with the babysitting or the household chores?). They complained their "brothers had freedom" they did not have. Females who wanted non-basic changes were almost 50 percent less satisfied with their fathers and almost 25 percent less satisfied with their mothers than males who wanted non-basic changes. These answers suggest a female need for more autonomy and for more time for the kind of individual development that is traditionally allowed male children. Other evidence of female dissatisfaction is that the female grand mean on both indices for each parent is about one whole point lower than the male grand mean.

Scores on the indices for respondents who did not answer the change question are lower than the no change group. They are low enough to indicate that this group was somewhat dissatisfied with both parents concerning autonomy and with their fathers concerning caring; it was the females who did not answer who were more dissatisfied with both parents. Perhaps these women either felt they could not answer and say critical things about their family, which is a characteristic problem in research on families, or they felt the

situation was hopeless and nothing would have improved their family life. The very low scores given by these women to their parents, especially to fathers combined with a reluctance to describe or define the problem (i.e., not answering the change question), may even indicate that they were victims of abuse. A couple respondents who were classified with the change father group reported they had been victims of an abusive father.

This study indicates possible considerations for those who would create parent-child activities. In the study population, dissatisfaction with family was very high. This might be a function of the size of the families or social status or even career choice, since the majority of the respondents had career goals in education. Nevertheless, it brings to attention a matter of concern for educators. Teachers and school officials who bring parents into formal schooling experiences without making allowance for dysfunctional family relationships may at best have a program failure, and at worse exacerbate the family problems. If, however, ways can be found to help parents nurture their children or to involve fathers, especially, in more productive relationships with their children, then school-parent programs should become an essential part of formal schooling.

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Table 1

Question Clusters Based on
Two Dimensions of Child-rearing

Caring <> Hostility/Neglect

Caring:

1. Cared about my feelings
2. Was easy to communicate with
3. Was consoling when I had troubles
4. Was openly loving and affectionate

Hostility/Neglect:

5. Was hostile and mean
6. Was impatient
7. Caused me to feel neglected
8. Caused me to feel resentful

Autonomy <> Domination/Manipulation

Autonomy:

1. Appreciated my contributions
2. Was fair
3. Was reasonable
4. Was supportive of what I wanted

Domination/Manipulation:

5. Intimidated me
6. Was domineering
7. Reminded me of sacrifices being made for me
8. Had unrealistic expectations concerning me

Table 2

DESIRED FAMILY CHANGES

Type of Change and Group Identification	Count Male	Female	Total	%
Group 1—No Change	11	10	21	11%
Group 2—Non-basic[a]	24	52	76	39%
Group 3—Basic[b]	20	28	48	
Father behavior	11	9	20	
Mother behavior	3	2	5	
Both Parents	8	1	9	
		Subtotal	82	41%
Missing, no response	12	6	18	9%
Total	89	108	197	100%

a Non-basic changes included answers like wanting the family to have a different birth order in the family, more or less siblings, less household responsibility, or more money and material goods.

b Basic changes included more acceptance of children, more love in home, more love between parents, better or more communication in the family and the special sub-categories of subjects who specified a problem with a parent.

Table 3

SIGNIFICANT CONTRASTS* BETWEEN
NO CHANGE, NON-BASIC CHANGE AND BASIC CHANGE GROUPS
ON THE C-H & A-D INDICES

C-H Index

Male Response		Female Response	
Mother Scores	Father Scores	Mother Scores	Father Scores
Gr.1 & Gr.3	Gr.1 & Gr.2	Gr.1 & Gr.3	Gr.1 & Gr.2
Gr.2 & Gr.3	Gr.1 & Gr.3	Gr.2 & Gr.3	Gr.1 & Gr.3
	Gr.2 & Gr.3		

A-D Index

Male Response		Female Response	
Mother Scores	Father Scores	Mother Scores	Father Scores
Gr.1 & Gr.2	Gr.1 & Gr.3	(The ANOVA result	Gr.1 & Gr.2
Gr.2 & Gr.3	Gr.2 & Gr.3	was not significant)	Gr.1 & Gr.3

* $p < .05$

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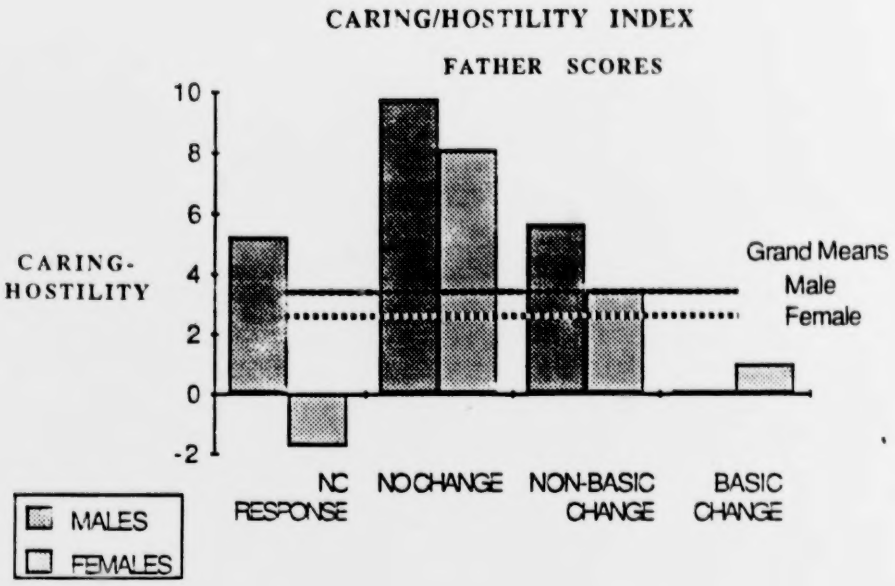


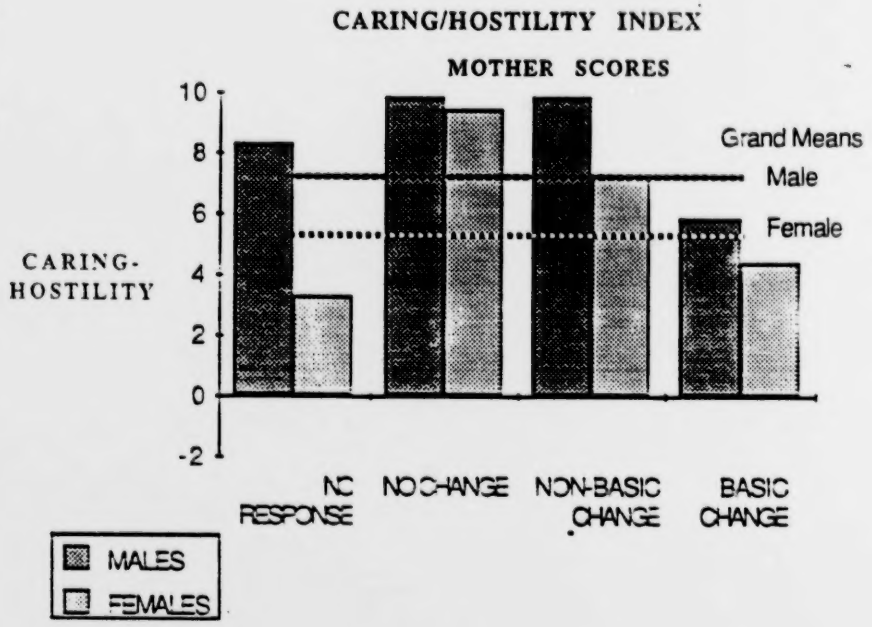
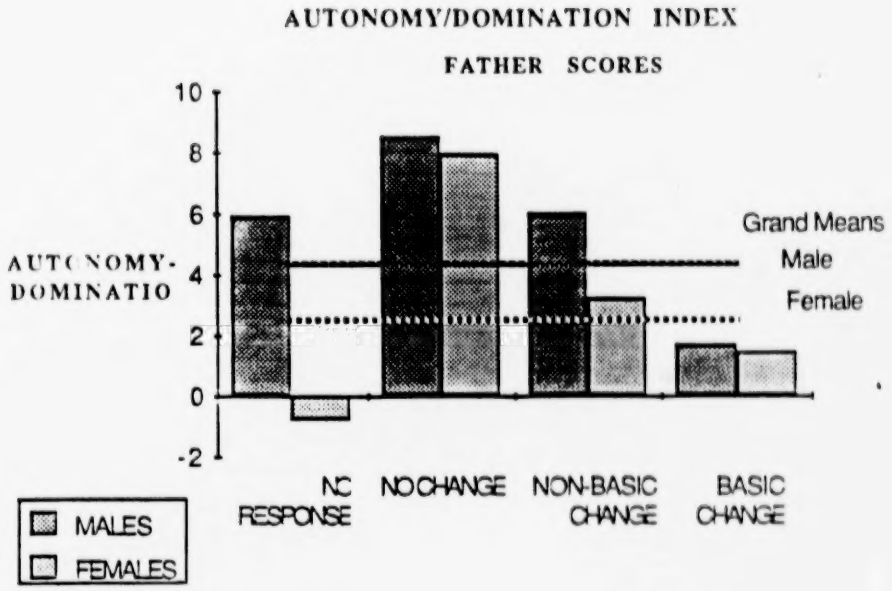


Figure 1. Mean scores for mother and father on the Caring-Hostility (C-H) Index. Subjects are divided into groups according to their answers to the question, "What would you have changed about your family when you were growing up?". Groups are identified in Table 2.



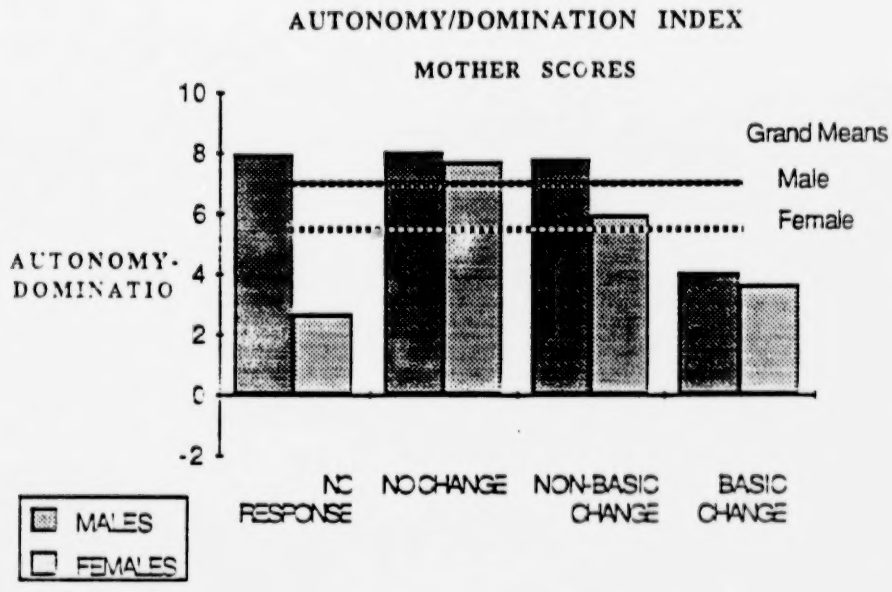


Figure 2. Mean scores for mother and father on the Autonomy-Domination (A-D) Index. Subjects are divided into groups according to their answers to the question, "What would you have changed about your family when you were growing up?". Groups are identified in Table 2.